

# VU Research Portal

## Roots and Routes

Reedijk, W.

2010

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Reedijk, W. (2010). *Roots and Routes: Identity Construction and the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Rodopi.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## SUMMARY

This summary consists of two components. In the first section, I will delineate the theoretical framework, elucidate the central concepts and introduce the research question. In the second section, I will present an overall analysis of the data and answer the research question.

### 1. Theoretical Framework

In this study, identity construction in an interreligious context is described and analysed against the backdrop of the dominant *either/or* discourse regarding religious diversity – and, for that matter, multiculturalism – in Western society. The conceptual framework is constituted by the debate on essentialism and constructivism. I argue that, under the right circumstances, interreligious dialogue can move beyond polemics and apologetics and prepare the ground for understanding in the dual sense of prejudice reduction and interreligious hermeneutics.

#### 1.1 *Questions and Presupposition*

Since I had been involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue myself for a long time, the subject of this study presented itself in a natural way. Obviously, key-figures of interreligious dialogue let themselves be inspired by the idea that encounters with other religions contribute to an improved understanding. The question if, and to what degree, dialogue participants do embrace new forms and insights - to paraphrase an old socialist anthem – was never addressed before. Hence the central question in this research: how does interreligious dialogue influence the identities of Jews, Christians and Muslims who are involved in this dialogue. This quest was based on three observations.

- (1) Public discourse on religious diversity and, for that matter, multiculturalism, is dominated by *either/or* rhetoric. The concern of many is that interreligious dialogue will in due course result in identity loss. In an *either/or* scenario, religious integrity and interreligious dialogue are viewed as an oxymoron.

- (2) Dichotomous thinking is a variant of essentialism. In the social sciences essentialism has been criticised, and constructivism adopted as a substitute. Nowadays the two paradigms are no longer considered mutually exclusive; they correspond to different aspects of reality. Considering that essentials may be subject to reinterpretation and that constructions may be experienced as meaningful, I assume that both essentials and constructions are valuable analytical tools.
- (3) The *credo* of interreligious dialogue, that encounters enhance understanding, can be traced back to Allport's (1954) contact thesis. Presumably, understanding is not a neutral value. As a concept, it is closely related to the views of (a) prejudice reduction and (b) interreligious hermeneutics with which Jews, Christians and Muslims enter into dialogue.

### 1.2 *Dynamic Essentials, Meaningful Constructs*

*Either/or* theories on identity construction and interreligious dialogue are fed by the assumption that simple solutions are available to complex relations and processes. They create false oppositions, as did Napoleon when he asked "his" Jews if they were loyal to *la patrie* or to the Jewish nation. Similarly many now feel that Jews, Christians and Muslims cannot simultaneously stand behind one's own faith community and spend one's precious time with other religions, adhere to one's own tradition and pore over other sources, cherish one's identity and let oneself be inspired by alien practices.

An empirical objection against dichotomising identity questions is that dialogue participants are continually confronted with paradoxes and dilemmas. In essentialist theories, paradoxes are incorrectly presented as being tantamount to *insolubilia*. However, a paradox may invite dialogue participants to study a case from different angles. Part of the "black or white" puzzle – if I am right, my dialogue partner is wrong – lies in the positivistic assumption that reality can be broken down into elementary building blocks or sortals. Yet, many of the concepts we use are imprecise; they are human constructs, based on interpretations and born in specific contexts. Dilemmas arise because we do not live in an homogenous culture anymore. Identities develop in our relationship with significant others and within continually changing circumstances.

Hall (1996) prefers the term identification. It refers to a never completed process of negotiation and articulation, and is visualised as a meeting place. Hall defends that identity formation is not about a return to our roots, but a coming-to-terms-with our routes. My presupposition is that identities are constructed in a constant interplay of one's orientation to the past and the future. Hence the title of my book: roots *and* routes.

The subtitle suggests that I embrace a constructivist point of view. However, I expected that my study would confirm that essentials and constructions are both relevant conceptual tools for the description and analysis of identity formation in the context of interreligious dialogue. We are dealing with different types of theories. Essentialism can be described as an ontological theory about the real or objective world; constructivism is a body of theories about the symbolic or linguistic construction of a human being's subjective world. Essentialism focuses on matters of truth, constructivism on meaning-making. Essentialism has a connotation of a core or fundament, authenticity and standing above history. The critique of essentialist theories is that they delineate a static picture of cultures and religions, which would be separated from one another by clear and closed boundaries. Constructivist theories emphasise that religious, cultural, national and even gender identities are the product of our creative imagination. In its mild variant, constructivism acknowledges that a real world exists outside of human consciousness; there are cases which one cannot wish away. Radical constructivism denies the brute facts: a mountain exists because our mind classified it as a mountain. The critique of radical constructivism is that it conceives of a scientific theory to be just one narrative amongst others, a personal opinion. The term radical constructivism is used as a synonym of postmodernism. Characteristic of postmodern writers, such as Derrida and Foucault, is that they have a special interest in power relations: in politics, in psychiatry, and so forth. In postmodernism, religion carries the connotation of ideology and false consciousness.

Informants have legitimate reasons to think what they think (cf. Baumann 1999). Moreover, people who profess an essentialist view will in all likelihood simultaneously practice a processual approach. Anderson (1995), Hobsbawm (1994) and Appiah (1992) also argue that the *emic* perspective should be taken seriously. They stress, for example, that nationalist myths may be meaningful to those whom it concerns; nations can in-

spire feelings of love. Appiah similarly concludes that the concept of *Négritude* functions as a metaphor for brotherhood.

The controversy between essentialism and constructivism has become less severe. Subscribing to this more nuanced view, in lieu of proceeding the dichotomous track, I assume that religious diversity and multiculturalism require that we deal with dynamic essentials and meaningful construction or, in other words, that we take cognisance of the best of both worlds.

### 1.3 Central Concepts

The subject of my study raises various conceptual questions. The three central notions in this study are identity, religion and dialogue. Each of these three concepts is related to two underlying conceptions, which are relevant to this research.

*Identity* (1) is a notoriously complex concept. In order to develop an operational definition, I used Simons' (2004) social-psychological theory of self-aspects: cognitive categories that serves to process knowledge about one-self, in other words, theories people have about themselves. Individual identity stands for the whole body of self-concepts we ascribe to ourselves. This is nicely illustrated in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, in which mister Stevens construed his individual identity as a butler, son of his father (who was a butler at Lord Darlington as well), man, and British subject (cf. Appiah 2005:16). Collective identity refers to group affiliation, e.g. "I feel Jewish." Individual and collective identities are the outcome of self-defining. I had to add a third element: objective identities, which are being established – and guarded – at the level of the religious community. The two to identity related concepts are alterity and authenticity. Alterity stands for being radically different. Authenticity, in the context of interreligious dialogue, is the capacity to be in touch with our inner self and the world.

With regard to *religion* (2) social scientists often hark back to the authoritative definition of Geertz (1973:4).<sup>1</sup> What makes his definition appealing is that Geertz (a) takes the *emic* perspective of the believes seriously and (b) draws our attention to powerful *moods and motivations*. The second element is important because it refers to the outstanding inner forces that ignite an interreligious encounter, and which dialogue participants share with one another: they are all extremely motivated to of-

---

<sup>1</sup> Geertz's religion definition is to be found on page 31 of the book.

fer their contribution to interreligious dialogue. The two to religion related concepts are truth and holiness. Dialogue participants have various views of truth, even if they are not aware of it. A current distinction in this regard is exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Since these truth-views, in their consequences, do not encourage the interreligious theological exchange, a fourth point of view was added: interreligious hermeneutics. Lots of cases may be set apart and pointed out as holy - objects, persons, texts, times, places, symbols, articles of faith. I focused on the ritual aspect because, in the context of interreligious dialogue, religious rituals in particular seem to be experienced as holy. In other words, rituals function as the boundary markers of interreligious dialogue.

*Dialogue* (3) is an elusive term, hence dialogue itself is one of the most discussed subjects of dialogue. Two concepts which are connected to dialogue are understanding and metaphor. Allport (1954) stressed that contact generates understanding if a series of conditions are met; he warned against a naive application of his contact theory. In the thought provoking view of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), metaphors reveal what we feel about something deep down. We know that "up" is connected with happiness, and "down" with sorrow. Talking about their direct experiences my informants refer to "bridges" they are going to build across "gaps"; to the long "road" one has to go, whilst "throwing away one's old pair of shoes" en route; they hope to be reunited as "a family", whilst enjoying a "meal", which will be enlightened with "candles." From an epistemological point of view the question had to be addressed whether we can understand other religions at all. Building on Rappaport (2002) and Tambiah (1990), I have argued that religious concepts can be translated, and made understandable, by means of analogy. Finally, three questions are central to my definition of dialogue: commitment, equality and reciprocity.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue influence the identities of its participants in terms of the essentialism versus constructivism controversy? What are, accordingly, the conditions under which *either/or* theories on the subject matter can be replaced by a *both/and* paradigm?

## 2. Analysis of the Data

An overall analysis of 44 transcripts show a consistent variety in the comments of my informants, such that three dialogue profiles were to be distinguished: advocate, ambassador, and boundary-dweller. The data further showed that dialogue participants construe their identities differently in three distinctive dialogue contexts. My third conclusion is that six conditions are to be met in order to transform the *either/or* discourse into a *both/and* approach. My fourth finding is that a large majority of interviewees shy away from a theological exchange. They seek refuge in the relationship which they, paradoxically, try to establish by means of polemical and apologetic strategies.

### 2.1 Profiles: Advocate, Ambassador, Boundary-Dweller

The in-depth interviews reveal that dialogue participants take recourse to three salient dialogue repertoires. Strikingly, these dialogue profiles do not run parallel with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim identities and affiliations; they cut across the boundaries between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

*Advocates* (1) are concerned about the well-being, in other words, the continuity of their faith community. To some of them, the importance of interreligious dialogue lies in the fact that it helped them to find their way back to their religious tradition. Advocates are staunch opponents of a theological exchange; it is thought to be unallowed because of the risk of syncretism, and considered impossible since Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths and practices are incommensurable. The real endeavour is to convince the dialogue partner that his prejudices are not appreciated. Advocates frequently use confrontational metaphors such as threat, intimidation and mine field.

*Ambassadors* (2) concentrate on the continuation of the interreligious relationship. In order to keep the peace, they try to avoid delicate subjects. Because of their frequent contact with the other, they become interested in and even charmed by his religion or culture; he starts explaining the background of those foreign habits and objects to his co-religionists. An ambassador is the paragon of hermeneutical prudence. Yet, in extraordinary circumstances – for example interreligious funerals – they are ready to create new openings in the boundaries so that they are able to “participate without participation.” Metaphors which are used by ambassadors – the turtle climbing down, or the

door which is sealed again – are expressions of the dilemmas they are being confronted with.

Typical of *boundary-dwellers* is that they emphasise the exploration of hitherto unknown routes; their preferential metaphor is the journey. In all likelihood, the boundary-dweller has long experience in and is a well-known spokesperson for interreligious dialogue. To prevent themselves from walking too far ahead of the troops, boundary-dwellers share their experiences in a dialogue *communitas*. They feel more understood in their dialogue group than in their faith community, insofar as interreligious matters are concerned. They are at home in the language of the dialogue partner: Jews who studied Arabic, Christians who know Hebrew, Muslims who master Western languages. Quite naturally, they greet others in the other's native language. This language play symbolises a broader attitude, a willingness to admit that "I may be wrong", and to place their beliefs and practices between brackets.

The above comments on dialogue profiles are not intended to offer a final proof of what real dialogue is about. The advocates may have very good reasons to be anxious or suspicious. It would have surprised me if the ambassadors had not encountered dilemmas. Reading their personal narratives, it made sense to me that boundary-dwellers tend to be trustful and curious. The dialogue village is inhabited by different personalities. In analogy with the ancient Israelites wandering in the desert, some individuals are entrusted with the task of being the vanguard (*barishona letsiv'otam* [Numbers 10:14]), whereas others take up the role of the rearguard (*measéf le khol hamakhanot* [Numbers 10:25]). Front-runners of interreligious dialogue and guardians of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions need one another. If dialogue participants ignore the concerns of their co-religionists, they risk being transformed into "psychological" (cf. Smith 1997: 16) Jews, Christians, and Muslims who might or might not understand the vital aspects of their tradition anymore.

## 2.2 Answering the Sub-Questions

A comprehensive analysis of the responses to six sub-questions shows that three distinctive processes of identity construction in three different dialogue contexts are to be distinguished. In the context of personal life histories, they interviewees report personal growth *and* a simultaneously stronger bonding with



one's own faith tradition. In the context of the conversation on religious traditions, I observed hermeneutical prudence *and* the capacity to postpone one's personal convictions for the sake of the relationship or truth-finding. In relation to their struggle against prejudice, my informants' longing for being understood and recognised is much stronger than their wish to understand *and* some of them nevertheless changed profoundly after an emotional, intellectual or existential breakthrough.

*1. How does Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue influence the individual and collective identities of its participants? How do they cope with the dilemma of authenticity and alterity?*

My respondents testified that their religious identities constitute a mainstay for personal growth. Yet, three types of respondents accentuate different perspectives. According to a large minority, interreligious dialogue contributes to the continuity and reinforcement of their collective identities, the bonding they feel with their religious roots. A small majority emphasise that dialogue also teaches them to orient themselves to the routes they have to travel. Front-runners of interreligious dialogue advocate the exploration of new paths, although they emphasise that they continue to be Jewish, Christian, and Muslim dialogue pioneers. None of my informants are interested in "petty" concerns about questions regarding personal identity – their individual identities. When asked about it explicitly, they connect authenticity to a sincere encounter with the other.

*2. On what grounds do my informants adhere to exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, or hermeneutics? How do they cope with the dilemma of truth-claiming and truth-finding?*

Again, three different types of comments were offered. A small number of respondents denounce the alleged creeds and practices of their dialogue partner and object to a theological exchange. A large majority of interviewees reject blunt exclusivism as well as straightforward inclusivism. Truth claims are highly suspect, and so are its messengers. Pluralism in the sense of an outright relativisation of religious essentials is considered problematic as well. Two strategies enable them to cope with the dilemma of truth-claiming and truth-finding: ignoring theological questions and stressing relative uniqueness. Rather than wrestling with a Wittgensteinian confusion of tongues, they seek refuge in relationships. I have called this attitude her-

meneutical prudence. A small group of dialogue pioneers are in favour of an interreligious hermeneutic. They reported that articles of faith can be discussed with representatives of other religions, without losing faith or destroying the relationship.

*3. Are ritual practices conceived of as holy? How do the interviewees cope with the dilemma of setting and transgressing the ritual boundaries in an interreligious context?*

Dialogue participants are aware of the dilemma that guarding the frontier is not a favourable starting point for improved understanding. They cross physical and emotional thresholds to meet one another. When they visit one another's houses of prayer, they are confronted with painstaking decisions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike argue that sharing religious rituals is very problematic and actually prohibited. Many of them consider shared prayer in particular theologically invalid and psychologically inconceivable. Rituals are holy in the sense that they are to be kept apart. As a consequence, rituals also divide: many informants reported feelings of exclusion all through the ritual encounter. Either observed or practised, in an interreligious context rituals deepen the gap. However, about one third of my interviewees reported that the holiness of ritual practices was placed between brackets during extraordinary encounters. They were pleasantly overwhelmed by the experience of shared mourning, eating, and celebrating festivals. In transgressing these boundaries, they created opportunities to participate without participation, if only for a liminal period of time.

*4. On what grounds do dialogue participants accept the contact thesis? How do they deal with understanding in the sense of prejudice reduction?*

The inventory of *longue durée* stereotypes and modern caricatures, my respondents encountered, reveals an astounding degree of "misunderstanding" between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. When requested to describe and explain what happens in an interreligious encounter, in terms of prejudice reduction, a small number of interviewees admit that they cast doubt on the contact formula. A large majority confirm the contact theory on experiential grounds, however, most respondents in this category expect others to change into considerate and insightful dialogue partners. They interpret questions regarding prejudice in terms of *their* prejudice against "us." Underneath their state-

ments the message is conveyed that they are longing for recognition rather than trying to understand. In the context of prejudice reduction, identity construction is given a quite different twist: dialogue participants are blaming others for the ascription of negative characteristics. A third category of informants emphasise agency. Their confidence in the possibilities of prejudice reduction stems from the fact that they have experienced a spiritual or conceptual breakthrough. According to them, understanding is a decision one has to make. These interviewees believe that contact works if one wants it to work.

*5. What are the views and expectations with which Jews, Christians, and Muslims enter into dialogue? What are their basic attitudes in the light of the dialogue metaphors they use?*

Serious political events, such as 9/11 and the murder of Van Gogh, led many of my informants to conclude that social cohesion and peaceful co-existence constitute the core business of interreligious dialogue. Yet, religion is their major source of inspiration. Moreover, they all argue that a separation of social and religious domains (a) is proven to be empirically untenable and (b) would be unjust from a Jewish, Christian, and Islamic point of view, respectively. Several interviewees testified to their fatigue; apparently, dialogue is replete with obstacles and setbacks. The metaphors of “war”, they use, confirm this disappointment and anger. Strikingly, in other contexts one third of the interviewees reported a *metanoia* experience. It made them decide “to throw away their old shoes.” In this category, Jews and Muslims are becoming aware of the prejudices from which the other suffers; Jews and Christians are reaching a new stage in the restoration of their damaged relationship, quite often after an existential crisis had opened their hearts and minds. Dialogue pioneers use metaphors that express the fact that it cannot be done overnight: engaging in interreligious dialogue is like embarking on a journey to an unknown destination.

*6. What are the effects of interreligious dialogue on the identity construction if analysed from a both/and point of view? What are the key elements of a both/and theory of interreligious dialogue?*

Interreligious dialogue creates two important both/and effects: continuity *and* change, individuality *and* communality. Narratives of personal life histories tell of continuity and change. This both/and experience is captured in the phrase that better per-

sons make better Jews, Christians, or Muslims, and *vice versa*. These individual stories are all embedded in grand or overarching narratives. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interviewees connect personal growth to their objective identities, which they have to take into account lest they risk becoming alienated from their religious traditions. By implication, dialogue participants must deal with two aspects of identity construction: individuality and communality. The dialectics of self-definition on one hand and identity construction through the authoritative narratives of faith communities on the other also account for the dilemma of avoiding or embracing interreligious hermeneutics.

### 2.3 *Answering the Research Question*

My study confirms that personal growth poses no threat to Jewish-Christian-Muslim continuity. On the contrary, meeting spokespersons of other religions contributes to a deeper understanding of the essence of one's religion. This both/and effect, of continuity and change, is most visible in the context of my interviewees' individual life histories. With regard to articles of faith and religious practices, sporadic references were made to a theological exchange. It appears that a majority of interviewees are both willing (in a personal setting) and unwilling (in a congregational setting) to consider alternatives. Therefore, the both/and effect of dynamic essences and meaningful constructions I had expected to find remains largely hypothetical.

Advocates in particular testified to their mistrust vis-à-vis their counterparts; ambassadors who were cautious reported abysses they experienced during interreligious encounters. Given the state of affairs, it seems to be a sheer miracle that interreligious dialogue exists at all. Yet, boundary-dwellers offered a cumulative explanation of the hermeneutical process they have undergone and that may be transformed into an educational model for all. According to a Jewish pioneer, it all begins as a personal encounter; a Muslim pioneer said that we need shock therapy that compels us to move on to the next level; a Christian pioneer observed that once there is a sincere encounter, even traditional believers start reinterpreting. Regardless of their hermeneutical prudence, some of the other interviewees came up with essentials they are eager to talk about, once the appropriate conditions are met.

Apparently, the major condition of transforming an either/or rhetoric into a both/and view of religious pluralism and

multiculturalism would be a mutual commitment to (re)build trust. My conclusion is that five other conditions are needed as well. The second condition is the acknowledgement that the global village we all live in is too complex to be framed in simple dichotomies. Dilemmas and paradoxes are part of the game. The third condition is the availability of safe places and "safe times." The dialogue *communitas* prevents dialogue participants from falling off the edge; periods of liminality offer the opportunity to explore alternatives without violating accepted boundaries. The fourth condition is that interreligious dialogue is complemented by intra-religious dialogue. The fifth condition includes a healthy political climate, in which civil and religious authorities are capable of offering an alternative to dysfunctional and obsolete dichotomies, hostilities, and feuds. A sixth condition would be interreligious hermeneutics.

Under the right conditions my informants are willing to consider alternatives, in other words, to play with the definitions of situations. To paraphrase Sainsbury (1988), play is both funny and serious. With regard to understanding, play would mean that we deliberately take off our masks and step out of our roles. With regard to hermeneutics, play would mean: dealing with different classifications of reality simultaneously (cf. Droogers 1995). Dialogue participants who are playing with *différance* (cf. Hall 1996), and translating texts and teachings (cf. Borowitz 2006), create opportunities to discover new realms (cf. Rappaport 1977) and new meanings (cf. Fernandez 1999).

### *Epilogue*

Following Neher (1994), dialogue starts from the *identité-thèse* as personified by Abraham, the patriarch who set off for an unknown country. His *identité-antithèse* came into being when the Israelites settled in Canaan. A life within closed and rigid boundaries creates existential loneliness. Yet many dialogue participants also experienced rich moments of understanding, an *identité-synthèse*. In coping with identity and alterity, in Neher's dialectical sense, the Jews, Christians and Muslims I have spoken with, have shown that it is possible to cherish one's roots *and* to explore new routes, in one way or another.

*Be'èzrat Hashém -- God Willing -- Insha Allah*